The Search for Truth
by
Rodney H. Clarken

"I don't know what You are or who You are, but if You
tell me what to do, even if it is to jump off a cliff, I'll
do it," I vowed to God in my adolescent search for the
meaning of life.

I grew up in a farming family that had experienced the
hypocrisy of the church, and as a result, they did not think
that organized religion had much to offer them. Although my
parents and relatives were not church-going people, I always
was attracted to religion and therefore, was often jokingly
called "preach" by some of my kin. It may have been because
my family wasn't interested in religion that I was attracted
to it, but more likely it was the subtle but real social
pressure of my classmates talking about their churches and
asking what church I went to that first encouraged me to
explore religion and attend church. Therefore, I started
going to the to the closest church to my home, the Friends
Church in Greenville, Iowa, only one mile from the farm we
lived on as sharecroppers. Though the Friends Church is a
Quaker denomination, it was probably more influenced by the
area than the Quaker philosophy.

As a teenager, I became aware of other religions and
questions that would not go away. I began to read about the
non-Christian religions and wonder why their followers would
be doomed to hell. I began to form ideas about how things
should be and wonder about ideas that should not be. In my search, I would talk to and read anything that was related to religion. I was attracted to sincere believers of all denominations and would talk to them about their beliefs. At the county and state fairs I would go from religious booth to religious booth asking questions and looking for answers. That is how I first heard about the Baha'i Faith.

Going to the Iowa State Fair in Des Moines at the age of sixteen was a both exciting and scary. Growing up in a small rural community in northwest Iowa, I did not have much experience with far away places and big cities like Des Moines, but a schoolmate of mine was going to show some livestock at the Iowa State Fair and had invited me to ride with him. It was an opportunity I could not pass up.

I was enchanted with the hustle and bustle of the state fair. The barkers in the carnival were inviting you to behold once-in-a-lifetime wonders for the unbelievably low price of a quarter. I would stand and listen to them go through their routines and entice the passer-bys to spend their money with them. The sights, sounds, and smells all combined to create magical world.

I had reserved an entire afternoon for the religious booths section in the display building. I only had a very superficial knowledge of the various Christian denominations, and knew even less of the other world religions, but I considered myself somewhat of an authority,
as most people did not seem to know that such religions as Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism even existed, let alone what their beliefs were. Although I did not completely accept the explanations of the Seventh Day Adventist, the Mormons, the Catholics or the other Christian groups, I respected and admired their devotion and would question them intently to get what ever understanding I could from them.

As I made my way through the various Christian booths at the fair, I came across a religion I had never heard about before - the Baha'i Faith. Posted on the back wall of the booth was a list of some of the teachings of the Baha'i Faith: the oneness of mankind, independent investigation of truth, progressive revelation, harmony of science and religion, elimination of prejudice, equality of men and women, and a universal auxiliary language.

"Of course, everyone believes that," I said naively after reading through the list.

A young man about three or four years older than I was manning the booth.

"What about the other religions and prophets? What about life after death? What is the purpose of life?" I fired at him in rapid succession.

There was no need to convince me, as the teachings and his answers all made so much sense to me that I immediately accepted them. Armed with about four or five pamphlets on the basic facts of the Baha'i Faith I returned to my home in
the northwest corner of Iowa. Over the next year I spoke on
the Baha'í Faith to my high school class. I also talked
about the Baha'í Faith with the Sunday school class of
junior high students that I taught.

The following year I returned to the state fair to
visit the Baha'í booth and replenish my stock of Baha'í
literature.

"Hello, I'm a Baha'í," I proudly announced to the frail
grey-haired woman standing with a cane in front of the
Baha'í booth.

"Well, when did you declare?" she asked me innocently.

"You don't have to join the Baha'í Faith like you do a
church," I explained to her. "It does no good to sign up
for something if you don't believe and live it. That's one
of the problems with the churches today. They're more
interested in membership lists than hearts."

"Bob," she called to her co-worker, as she could see
that this might call for some reinforcements. Bob talked
with me, gave me some pamphlets and a copy of the book
Baha'u'llah and the New Era, and sent me off with his
assurance that he would let the Baha'ís in Mississippi know
I would be attending the University of Southern Mississippi
so that they could get in touch with me.

I had chosen to attend the University of Southern
Mississippi because of my concern over civil rights and
because it was someplace different from my home. I had also
received a scholarship to go there, which helped as neither my family nor I were financially in the best position to afford a college education.

I considered myself a true believer and an expert on the Baha'i Faith, even though I had read only a few pamphlets and a little bit of one introductory book. I gave a speech on the Faith in my speech class and the professor was so impressed that she asked me to talk about it to the other professors in her department. I told the chaplain of the university about the Baha'i teachings and he requested I make a presentation to the regional meeting of campus chaplains. I also convinced my art appreciation professors that a talk on the Baha'i Faith should be included in their class of over two hundred students and they asked me to give the talk.

My presentations consisted of the basic facts about the Baha'i Faith, as I knew little more. Although I had little knowledge, everyone else had less and therefore, I was considered the authority on the subject. If a question arose for which I did not know the correct Baha'i response, I gave what I thought made sense for an answer.

By the end of the second quarter, I had had enough of college. I thought the courses were irrelevant and felt the need to get on with life. Everyone was cramming for their final exams and I was out-of-place, just waiting for the term to end so that I could go to New Orleans to live in an
ashrama I had heard about. Being a Baha'i of little
knowledge, I saw nothing wrong with being a Quaker, a
Baha'i, and a guru of Bodhi Sala all at the same time. I
was bored and went into the hall of the dorm to get a drink
and maybe meet the two new hippy-type guys I had just seen
moving into the room two doors from mine, when I overheard a
conversation.

"Do you want to see a film I made for one of my
classes?" a stranger asked one of the fellows who lived on
my floor of the dorm.

"I can't. I have to study for a test tomorrow," he
replied.

"I'd like to," I interrupted, jumping into their
conversation from the drinking fountain where I was
eavesdropping.

"Well... Okay... I guess," was all the stunned
stranger could muster up.

After viewing the films in a house which he rented with
two other students, I picked up a guitar and noticed a
Baha'i button on its strap.

"Who does this guitar belong to?" I shouted to my
reluctant host in the front of the house.

"George, my roommate. Why?" he shouted back.

"Is he a Baha'i?" I asked thinking how surprised I was
to see that the Baha'i Faith would be so organized as to
have buttons.
"Yah. Why?"

"I've got to meet him."

"Well, I think he just dove up."

The next thing I heard was someone coming in.

"George, there's a guy in the back room who wants to meet you," my host said.

"Okay," George replied, "but first I have to make a phone call."

George made his call, but got no answer and then came back to meet me.

"Hi, I'm Rod. Are you a Baha'i?" I said all at once.

"Rod! Rod Clarken?" he said looking at the piece of paper in his hand, "I was just trying to call you on the phone."

The man I had met at the Iowa State Fair seven months ago, had contacted the Local Spiritual Assembly of Jackson, Mississippi, who had in turn just contacted George, a student at the University of Southern Mississippi, to see if he could get in touch with me. He had tracked down my phone number and was just trying to call me at my room while I was sitting in his.

I told him about the things I had been doing on campus. He had been hearing rumors about someone giving talks on the Faith, but could not understand why he had not met this "Baha'i." George informed me that a little known Baha'i singing duo, Seals and Crofts, would be performing in the
basement of the student union the next night and we decided to go together to hear them.

The next night at the concert, I met the two hippy-type guys who were staying next to me in the dorm, they were Seals and Crofts. The concert was wonderful, complete with Seals and Crofts introducing George, myself and another Baha'i as their Baha'i brothers and then giving a short introduction on the Faith to the sixty-some people who showed up to hear them sing. After the performance, the Baha'is and some interested people from the audience spent several hours with Seals and Crofts discussing the Faith.

The air at the University was charged with Baha'i, but it was the end of the term and I was leaving in two days for an ashrama in New Orleans. While there I called the Baha'i number in New Orleans, but was told that little was happening as it was the month for of the fast. I soon felt the need to be doing something more with my life and decided to return to Iowa and subsistence farm. This experience was cut short as a result of a drought that destroyed all my crops and a letter from my local draft board informing me that I was being drafted into the military service.

I applied for conscientious objector (CO) status and had to get three letters of support for my position. I asked the pastor of the Friends Church in which I had given sermons and taught Sunday School, the guru of Bodhi Sala who had ordained me as a guru of her ashrama, and the Baha'i I
had met at the state fair to write letters on my behalf. With such a combination, I was sure to get CO status. Bob's response to my letter explaining my position to him and asking for him to write a letter in my support stunned me. He said I really did not have a good understanding of the Baha'i teachings and if I was sincere about being a Baha'i, I should go, a visit a Baha'i that lived near Sioux City, some eighty miles from where I lived. Eighty miles was a long way for me to go, but I was sincere, so I borrowed my fathers truck and set off for the little town of Kingsley, where John and Karen Para lived. John, a fatherly figure with a heavy Czech accent, spent several hours talking with me and gave me several books to read.

That same week I presented my case to the local draft board and then I put myself in God's hands, vowing to abide by whatever He gave me. He gave me A-1 status and I accepted it trusting in His wisdom. Two days later, I got a call from the secretary of the draft board asking me to resubmit my application for CO status as the procedure was new to them and they had not followed the proper steps the first time. By this time I had read more of the Baha'i writings and changed my reasons for wanting CO status in accordance with my understanding of the Baha'i position. This time I was given CO status which meant that I would do alternative service in a non-military setting. Later, as I read more, I saw my statements were compromising the Baha'i
position and informed the draft board that I could not in
good conscience accept the rating they had given me. They
continued me on the same status. Finally, I received a copy
of the official Baha'i position on service in the armed
forces and took this to my draft board requesting that my
file be reconsidered in light of my new understanding, as I
was a Baha'i and wanted to classified according to the
Baha'i teachings. The lottery was begun shortly after this
and I received a number that did not call for me to be
drafted.

This process confirmed me in my belief and brought me
into contact with other Baha'is. If I was a Baha'i, why not
fill out a card that says so. So I did. I filled out a
declaration card I had been given and sent it in the mail to
the National Baha'i Center.